



The beginner's guide to Online Gambling

It's a fair bet that you'll have noticed the recent explosion in online gambling. Paul Cheung takes you through the basics and gives you some tips to make sure you back a winner if you fancy a flutter on the net

Walk into any department store and you'll probably notice multicoloured ceramic poker chip sets and green-baize tables on display. Switch on *Match of the Day* and chances are the panel will be discussing the odds on Chelsea winning their next match. Step into the street and you're sure to pass a massive billboard advertising the latest online casino. It's pretty fair to say that gambling is hot property and even more so in its online incarnation.

Less than two years ago you could have counted the number of online gaming sites on the fingers of one hand; now there are hundreds, with more launching all the time. To make it easy for you to get to grips with the online gambling scene, we've broken it into its three main parts: poker, online casinos, and sports betting. We should make it clear that the American dollar is the currency of choice across all poker and casino sites, so make sure that you take that into account before depositing any money.

ONLINE POKER

Typing 'online poker rooms' into the Yahoo! search engine reveals over 15 million hits, but we'd warn against just clicking on a random site. As with many internet operations, there are inevitably some rogue traders out there. The question is, how do you sort the genuine from the fraudsters and make a discerning choice?

Funnily enough, your first stop shouldn't be an online poker room at all. Your initial port of call should be either www.pokerlistings.com or www.pokerpulse.com. These sites are like the Yellow Pages of poker and a directory enquiries service rolled into one: they provide substantial and up-to-

the-minute listings. Here you'll find reviews of the most popular poker sites, which ones are offering the biggest prize pools and when the next tournament is going to start. You can even pose questions on the forum to see which sites other people recommend. If you cross-reference *PokerListings* and *PokerPulse*, you'll notice that the same names come up time and time again. *PartyPoker*, *Paradise Poker* and *InterPoker* are the real giants of the poker world and you can't go far wrong if you choose to play with one of them.

Let's say, for example, that you pick *InterPoker*, on the strength of its *PokerListings* review, which points to good functionality and 'soft' games (that is, for beginner players). First you have to download the *InterPoker* software. At 292KB, it should take only a few seconds to download. This will give you access to the *InterPoker* poker lobby and you may think you're only seconds away from making your millions.

Wait, though, because poker can take many forms and just diving straight into a \$100 (around £57) Omaha Hi/Lo Multi-Table

tournament is a recipe for disaster. All forms of poker contain elements of luck, but the first step to being a consistent winner is having a firm grasp of the rules. We recommend you try and master the most popular form of the game, Texas Hold 'Em, before venturing into more exotic forms of the game such as Omaha Hi/Lo and Five-card Stud. If you're a 'fish' – a newbie – you can get up to

speed on the rules at www.interpoker.com/strategy. On whatever site you choose to play, there are tutorials and tips to help.

If you prefer a more hands-on approach to learning, you'll be happy to learn that any poker site worth its salt provides what are known as free play

POKER JARGON

Blinds Forced bets, which ensure that there is money to fight for in every pot
Check Where there are no bets on the table and you don't want to bet either, this is known as a check
Flop The first three face-up community cards
Hole cards The starting cards that only you can see
Muck The act of returning a losing hand to the dealer, face-down
Raise Betting more than the amount that was wagered by a previous bettor

tables. Here you can play and chat with fellow beginners in the same way you would on the real money tables, but without the financial pain/gain. It's a great way to understand how the betting works and how strong different hands are. But keep in mind that because nothing is at stake, you'll probably get sucked into playing very 'loose', playing hands of the type that can spell doom at the real money tables. Try and believe the free chips are real money so as not to pick up any bad habits.

PLAYING FOR REAL

Now you have enough poker theory in your head to write a small book, it's time to get serious. Opening up a real money account is like registering on Amazon or any other major shopping site: you enter a username, address and a password. You can deposit money using a credit card, but we would advise against this as it can be hard to get the money paid back to your card. A better option is to use an online wallet such as *Neteller* or *FirePay*. These services act as a layer between the site and your debit or credit card, and only require you to



Sites such as www.pokerlistings.com are invaluable if you want to find the poker room that suits your needs



Like many online poker rooms, *InterPoker* has a variety of methods for you to deposit and withdraw money



InterPoker is easy to navigate. Just pick which game you want to play and your table stake and you're away



InterPoker's blackjack not only looks like the real thing, it sounds like it too, complete with card shuffling and chip ruffling

record your card details with the online wallet service. PayPal, the most commonly used e-wallet, is not supported by any online gambling site.

By far the easiest option is to use a debit card. To deposit or withdraw money from your account in almost all cases, you simply have to enter an amount and key in your password. The transaction will usually be effected within an hour.

A lot is made of sign-up bonuses offered by online poker rooms, but make sure you know what you're getting into before you start laying down the cash. Some sites heavily advertise the fact that they'll match a \$1,000 (around £565) deposit with \$1,000. But what they keep quiet about is that to qualify, you must play a certain amount of raked hands, where the poker room takes a percentage of the pot (usually about five per cent). InterPoker's sign-up bonus of \$90 (around £51) is available only once you've deposited at least \$25 (around £14) and played at least 450 raked hands. We're not saying that sign-up bonuses are rip-offs, but just be aware that they don't come for free.

It's far better to deposit as much as you want to, so you can play hands without the pressure of knowing that you must fulfil a certain quota.

Winning poker is a game of patience. Start off with a small bankroll in small stakes games, such as 0.50c (around 28p), and work up from there.

ONLINE CASINOS

Online casinos are the grand old dame of online gambling. They might not be as sexy as poker, but the software has been refined hugely over the years. If you like the gaming side of the casino experience – the heart-in-mouth moment waiting for the roulette ball to drop – more than the free drinks and gaudy neon, the online version is for you. A dealer will not hurry you into a decision in an online casino, and nobody will laugh when you ask for £2 in chips. Best of all, online games are set up to give a lower house edge (the inherent bias in the games towards the casino) than you'll find in Vegas, Mayfair or Monte Carlo.

There are over 1,000 online casinos, so knowing where to start can be daunting. Wherever

you sign up, make sure you know some basics about the casino before you give away your bank details. It's good advice to stick to the big names such as William Hill, Bet365, 888, InterCasino, Virgin Games and 32Red. They are not the only reliable casinos, however, and a good guide to those you can trust can be found at

www.casinomeister.com/casinos. You can also check a site doesn't make the blacklist at www.top-20-casinos-online.co.uk/index.php?item=blacklist.

There are two types of online casino: non-download and download. The download version requires you to install an .exe file on your PC. The advantages of this are that it takes less time to get started and the graphics and sound are usually of a much higher quality. In terms of security, only the most roguish casinos come with spyware attached. Non-download options are becoming more popular due to the increased availability of broadband and the graphics are of a high quality, but they tend to have a more limited range of games.

The good news is, just as in online poker, you can try before you buy. Although you won't win anything this way, it's an easy way of finding out which software you like, how smoothly the games run on your PC and who has the best games. And it won't cost you a penny.

Signing up for a real money account is generally the same as for online poker rooms, although some sites may ask you to supply a photocopy of your passport or driving licence before your first withdrawal. This is a common security measure to prevent fraud and comply with anti-money-laundering regulations.

Once you've signed up and deposited, where do you start? Even the most simple online casino presents you with a bewildering array of games from craps and Sic Bo to Caribbean 21 and the alarmingly named Casino War.

Most of these are designed to make sure grizzled online casino veterans don't get bored, and most players stick to slots, roulette or blackjack.

The most widely available option at any site is the slots games. You will find hundreds of variations online, from Vegas-style games to ones that resemble a pub fruit machine. There's no skill involved in a slots game; it's

gambling in its purest form. However, there is one advantage to these games. Usually the slots games

MAJOR ONLINE CASINOS

Play it safe, stick with big-name casinos

<http://casino.virgingames.com>
www.32red.com
www.888.com
www.bet365.com
www.intercasino.com
www.willhill.com

TECH SPECS FOR ONLINE GAMBLING

Online gambling sites are designed to run on all but the most ancient PC systems. As long as you have a Pentium II processor and enough RAM to run Windows 98, you should be fine. Although there are a few 3D graphically intensive casino and poker sites on the horizon, at present there are few with graphics and sound that would trouble your average mobile phone.

The most important thing is to have enough space on your hard disk, as some casinos' software can take up around 80MB. If you're running the non-download casinos, make sure you have

the latest versions of Flash and DirectX installed. As a guideline, a recommended system from InterCasino, one of the more popular casino sites, is:

- PC-compatible computer
- Windows 98 or above (NT excluded)
- 350MHz Pentium II processor or above
- 64MB RAM
- 8MB video card with 32-bit colour (800x600 or higher)
- DirectX 7 or above
- Macromedia Flash Player 5

- 35MB disk space
- Sound Blaster AWE 32-bit sound card or better

We'd recommend a large LCD screen, particularly for poker sites as the cards can sometimes be very small, especially if you are playing more than one table at a time. The most important thing to have is broadband, as the gaming experience is vastly improved by a fast, stable connection. There's nothing more frustrating than winning a big hand in poker and your connection dropping.



IS ONLINE GAMBLING SAFE?

You are no less safe using your debit card in an online gaming site than in any other e-commerce site. The more reputable sites have security that would make a bank sit up and take notice. Act as you would when purchasing goods online. You wouldn't buy from a site you have never heard of that has no recommendations and appears to have no obvious security measures. So exercise similar caution and play only with sites you trust.

What can go wrong? Well, a site could simply steal your deposit and credit card details, although this is almost unheard of. The site could also be rigging the results so you cannot win. This again

is unlikely, but although there have been no proven cases of online firms rigging the random number generators used to pick the results, it is wise to be wary before depositing your money. There are some rogue operators out there, so be careful.

Read the About us, or Why choose us sections of a website and take a small amount of time to make sure you know where your money is going. Is it going to a firm that is listed on the London stock exchange, (888, 32Red) or to a firm that doesn't even have a mailing address? However, you can rest assured that the vast majority of complaints involve casino sites withholding winnings or not paying bonuses rather than theft. If in doubt, stick



Casinomeister's blacklist tells you which online casinos are so bad you shouldn't even talk about them

to brands and sites you have heard of. And never deposit large amounts until you have tested the withdrawal mechanics.



Sites such as www.oddschecker.com not only help you bet, but bet smart



Stick to well-known bookies such as William Hill if you're dipping into sports betting for the first time



If you're not quite ready to try Betfair for real, why not try the play money site?

from various sites will be linked together to form huge 'progressive' jackpots. These can exceed \$1m (around £566,000), and vary widely depending on when they were last won. For an up-to-date guide to who is currently offering the biggest prize, go to www.jackpotfinder.com/jackpots.phtml.

For most people, casino gaming is all about roulette. It's the game that gives you the best chance to win big, but is also one of the hardest to play smartly. There is no winning system, but it is the ultimate adrenaline-surge game for thrill-seekers. Or you could always just bet black every time – you will only lose 53 per cent of the time on average.

The other main game is blackjack. This is the one game where you can play with skill and keep your losses to a bare minimum. If you play with basic strategy, you can have a theoretical loss rate of 0.05 per cent. Basic strategy denotes what you should do relative to the dealer's hand if dealt a certain starting hand. A simple chart can tell you, based on your first two cards, whether to stick, twist or fold. The charts are widely available online (try www.wizardofodds.com) and 888.com even has one in the gaming window. If you are lucky enough to get on a winning streak, you should cash out.

All sites give you a bonus for signing up, and some give you one for continuing to play at the site. For example, InterCasino gives you a £50 match bonus each month you play there. This means if you deposit £50 the site will put another £50 in your account. So all you have to do is withdraw the £100, right? Wrong. Not surprisingly InterCasino thought of this, so before you can withdraw your money you have to gamble 25 times the bonus amount. In other words, you have to place bets worth £1,250. However, if you stick to basic blackjack strategy you will usually come out on top.

If you lose just one per cent of your total bets you will have lost only £12.50 of your £50 bonus.

SPORTS BETTING

Gone are the days when betting on Saturday's game was solely the remit of old men in smoke-filled betting shops with darkened windows. Since old favourites such as William Hill and Ladbrokes bookmakers discovered the power of the internet, the entire bookmaking industry has been able to tap into an age demographic ranging from 18 to 80. Now you can place any bet online that you might make if you went into a shop, and it's fast, convenient and discreet.

If you've never had a bet on any kind of event, www.oddschecker.co.uk is a great tool for finding all the major bookmakers, what markets they're offering and where the best value lies. Don't be surprised if you see a market on who will win Miss World or the Finnish presidential election – bookmakers almost always take bets on anything that's going on. But as with online poker and casino companies, it's always best to stick with reputable firms.

A sports betting, internet-only phenomenon that you may have heard of but might not know much about is the betting exchange. Unlike a traditional bookmaker, exchanges make money from charging commission on winning bets. Another crucial difference is that it is other members of the public who set the odds. You can choose to back a result as you would with a normal bookmaker, or to lay – go against – a result.

Betfair is the largest and most successful betting exchange by a long way and it controls around 90 per cent of the market. Because exchanges work best when there are a lot of people

backing and laying, there's little point in going anywhere else. Registering is easy. Go to www.betfair.com and sign up in the same way you would with an online poker room. Again, try and use a debit card for depositing and not a credit card as not only will this save you 1.5 per cent every time you deposit, but when you withdraw your funds they'll go straight back into your bank account within two to five working days.

A great touch is that before you take the plunge with real money, you can have a little go on the play-for-fun site at www.playbetfair.com, which allows you to bet on actual sporting events with play money to see how you would do. It's a great way of easing you into a betting medium that can at first seem overwhelming. Our tip is that you spend time checking out the Betfair forums, as they're chock-full of invaluable advice from professional punters who use Betfair to make their living all day, every day. **CS**

SPORTS BETTING JARGON

Back Betting that a certain outcome will take place

In-play Betting while an event is in progress

Lay Backing an outcome not to happen

Liability The amount you can lose on a given bet

Matched bet A bet made between a backer and a layer at a betting exchange. Once a bet is matched, it cannot be cancelled